

WHICH COLLEGE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Jonathan Simon,
Professor
Department of Mathematics, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242
(319) 335-0768 jsimon@math.uiowa.edu

There are so many reasons to choose or refuse a particular college, and so many fine schools to pick from; this guide may help to make the process more manageable. Please *note that this document represents my own personal opinions and is not intended to represent any "official" views of the Mathematics Department or the University.*

GUIDE: Decide each of these questions in order. (Of course, if one of these is especially important to you, make it your first criterion; if you're not sure, then follow the order I'm suggesting.) Criteria 7 and 8 probably won't become important until you actually visit the campus, which you should do once you narrow the list of possibilities to a reasonable number. Criteria 0-6 are designed to help get you there.

DECISION 0 2-year vs. 4-year

Do you want to go directly to a 4-year college, or do you want to start with 2-year community college and then transfer. (I am not here trying to advise students who want to attend a 2-year program and go directly to work. That's a fine goal, and you should be talking with counselors etc. to decide the right field.) Advantages of the community college start might include: easier transition from high school, more personal attention, lower costs, and staying closer to home. Disadvantages might include: Some students having difficulty adjusting to the rigors and competition of some upper level college courses, delayed entry to advanced courses in your major, missing out on the social growth and out-of-class education found in campus living. The rest of this guide is written towards 4-year schools.

DECISION 1 city vs. town or small city vs. rural

Do you want to spend four years amidst the excitement and cultural/business opportunities (and urban inconveniences or fears) of a major city? Do you want the intimacy and safety (and possibly boredom) of a small town or rural campus? Do you want the hybrid environment of a small city?

DECISION 2 big university vs. medium vs. small college

A big university will offer excellence in many departments, faculty active in research, big-time sports (o.k., we'll make an exception for Cal Tech, MIT, and the Ivy League, but even they take their sports seriously), lots of on-campus theater, music, etc., international students and cultural diversity; the downside is some large lecture classes, some classes taught by graduate students, and a real need for you to be assertive in making friends, getting to know professors, and taking full advantage of the bewildering array of opportunities. A small college will offer intimacy, the sense of a close-knit and protective community, ease of getting to know faculty and fellow students; the downside may be claustrophobia or a shortage of research, fewer strong alternatives for majors or other professional opportunities. (In deciding whether a particular school will give you a "big university" experience, the size is basic, but also consider how many departments have Ph.D. programs.)

DECISION 3 geography

Which part of the country do you prefer? Do you want to stay in the Midwest? Do you seek the beaches and mountains (and long, infrequent, expensive plane rides home) of California? Do you want the ethnic richness or Atlantic coasts of the Northeast? Do you crave the expanses and robustness of Texas? Do you want to go to the state university where many of your high school friends are going, or do you want a new environment? In addition to scenery and climate, you might also consider the presence of relatives in some area as a factor; it's very nice to be able to go to Aunt Susie's house for a weekend or holiday dinner.

DECISION 4 ethnic or religious preference

Do you want to go to a school with a strong religious affiliation? A strong cultural tradition (e.g. one of the HBCUs)? A school with no religious affiliation or cultural identification? If you already have selected a "big university" located in a "big city", then it's probably safe to assume there will be a significant number of students representing whatever ethnic or religious group you seek; however, in smaller schools or smaller communities, that could be an issue. And even among large universities, there is a lot of variation from school to school in how many students there are of type "xyz".

DECISION 5 academic strength

Some colleges have national reputations that *may* make it easier for you to get into graduate school or jobs if you succeed at those schools; and if the reputations are deserved, then you *may* get a more rigorous education, surrounded by (and competing with) stronger students. You also are likely to feel more competitive pressure. *I believe the distinction between "more competitive" and "less competitive" matters a lot if you are considering small colleges. If you are considering large universities, there will be many strong students and faculty, so that doing well at such a school will be (a) educationally significant, and (b) an effective route to your future opportunities.*

Do you want to go to the toughest college you can get into (danger of being "small fish in a big pond", some small chance of being "big fish in a big pond"), one where you will be easily at the top of the class (glory and awards, but perhaps not carrying much weight outside), or one where you will be in the middle. When advising students on how to select a graduate school, I usually tell people to "go to the best place that will give you money"; in other words, go to the best place that will accept you with the expectation that you will succeed strongly (not minimally). The same advice seems appropriate in selecting a college: go to the most demanding and competitive school in which you're likely to do very well. Let me stress that this is "other factors being equal" kind of advice; some students may find a less competitive, highly nurturing, atmosphere the right one in which to flourish.

I checked 100 UI faculty and found that their undergraduate schools were approximately 25% relatively non-competitive colleges, 50% moderately competitive colleges or large universities, and 25% highly competitive schools.

DECISION 6 money \$\$\$

Why isn't this item at the top of the list?? The "official" position of almost all colleges and universities is that anyone who is accepted will be able to attend, regardless of their family's financial situation. I believe that, to a large extent, this is true: between scholarships based on academic, athletic, or other special merit, and scholarships based on financial need, the college will enable you to attend, regardless of whether your family is rich or poor. However, I do not believe that there is enough money around to make it equally easy for everyone. In particular, middle class families will be asked to pay an amount that they feel is a lot. I really do believe that it would cost a student from a middle class family much more to attend Harvard than it would to attend the University of Iowa, simply because the amount that is computed to be the maximum the family can afford is higher than the total cost for an in-state student at a state university. I put this criterion as #6, because I hope you don't give it unnecessary or premature weight. I do believe that the colleges are sincere in wanting to take money out of the equation; if there's a school that's perfect for you, do give the school a chance to offer a financial package that you can afford. And if their first offer is frightening, push them a little before deciding you can't do it.

DECISION 7 daily living

This category is a hodgepodge of various distinctions. At some schools, it is assumed (by custom, not necessarily "rules" - you need to ask specific questions about what percent of juniors or seniors are living in the dorms) that students will live in a dorm the first year or two, and then move to an off-campus apartment, while at others, the dorm is a 4-year prospect. Which do you prefer? At some schools, the campus social scene is dominated by fraternities and sororities, while at others the Greek system is insignificant. Do you want a school where half the students went to private high schools? Do you want one where most students come from farm or blue-collar families? Of course this relates to DECISION 4 also.

DECISION 8 the "wow" factor

This insight came from an admissions officer at a college my son visited, and it struck me as especially valuable: If a prospective student arrives at some campus and exclaims, "Wow!! This is where I want to be!!", you and your family should give that reaction a lot of respect. If some college excites you and makes you want to work hard, get involved, become an important part of the campus community, etc., then that is a place where you will flourish.